



## **RABINDRANATH TAGORE: THE MODERN KABIR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The present paper proposes that Tagore's poetic expressions are heavily influenced by the philosophy of Kabir; in a way, Tagore is the modern Kabir. In the present work, readers will be able to draw a parallel between Kabir's poems and those of Tagore. Many streams of Kabir's Poetic River merge into Tagore's poetic water fountain and take new hues and shapes. The present work I am undertaking will facilitate the future readers and researchers to understand Tagore and Kabir in a better way.*

**Keywords:** Vedanta Philosophy, Maya, Mahatma, Guru, influence, mystical pantheism, anthropomorphic, Jivan Devata.

The present work is an attempt to examine closely the creative and expository writings of Tagore and also the various studies made on him with a view to establishing the influence of Kabir's philosophy which shaped his spiritual thinking and art. When we go through the poems of Tagore, we are likely to detect the reflections of Kabir's ideology in them. It will enable the readers to draw a parallel between the poetry of both the poets.

Attempts are made by analyzing the poetry of both the poets to trace the influence of Kabir on Tagore's religious poetry. An Endeavour is made to discuss the similarities of some ideas and concepts that they (Kabir and Tagore) share equally.

The purpose of this work is to detect the impact of Kabir and his philosophy on Tagore and his poetic expression. It also tries to regenerate the interest of English and Non-English readers in the age-long Indian school of Vedanta philosophy that once preached the lessons of peace, tolerance, equality and global brotherhood to the world. It also gives a new outlook to the readers who will find it interesting to compare the poets of two different centuries on some similar grounds.



Kabir was a realist and his poetry was a revolt against the social orthodoxies of his time. He did not write anything base or worthless. His poetry was a result of his own experiences that he faced in his life. He was the poet of an age when Indian social milieu was suffering from a great political, economical, social and religious upheaval.

His messages are still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even I can say “*O Kabir! Thou should be living at this hour, this world is in need of thee*”. He discarded the archaic practices of the religions whether they belonged to Hinduism or Islam. He was born in an age when society was bound in the chains of communal disagreement, casteism, hypocrisy, dead ritualistic practices and blind faith.

Guru Ramanand was his religious mentor and taught him the lessons of the *Vedanta philosophy*. Kabir was illiterate outwardly, and his poetry was a reflection of his own experiences. He learned a lot through his encounters with life's dark realities.

He was doubtlessly a self-illuminated soul. Kabir also rejected the hypocritical practices of the religious figures of all the religions whether they belong to the Hindu community or Islam or any other in context of Indian paradigm. He also raised a voice against caste system and some bitterly practiced dead customs of society. He was a strong humanist and put aside all the intolerance in religion. In his songs or couplets we find his conceptualization of God, human soul, death and existence of this world. He accepts the dominance of mortality and he explains it through his mystic poems. He sees it with a positive attitude.

On the other hand Rabindranath Tagore, the child of Indian renaissance, comes from a rich family of Bengal but lived a life of stoic or *mahatma*. His poetry is voluminous and deals with different themes. He is not only a poet, novelist and dramatist, but also a fine story teller, painter and lyricist. His poetry is full of mysticism, humanism, realism and romanticism.

We find a close similarity between Kabir's and Tagore's poetry on some grounds. His poetry was one of the great entities which turned Tagore's life to a new horizon.

Though Tagore was not brought up in such conditions as Kabir was reared in, both of them were devoid of the parental love that a child needs in its younger days. Tagore's literary outcome was a result of his own experiences. Tagore's mother died when he was too young and was taken care of by his loyal servants. His feelings and ideas were respected by one of his elder's wife but she also died untimely. He was a lonely child and not allowed to go out alone. He was a boy of very sensitive and shy nature. He, too, passed most of his life in the close contact with Nature and that can be seen clearly in his works. He was greatly inspired by the ideas of *Brahmo Samaj* lead by his grandfather and initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy to regenerate the old *Vedanta Philosophy* of ancient India.

He perused all the necessary literature on religion related to the old Hindu Civilization and accepted the non-duality of God and followed the principles of *karma yoga* described in *The Bhagvat Geeta* by Lord Krishna. He opposed all the fatal practices of the society like child marriage, animal sacrifice and Sati Pratha. He, too, like Kabir holds that human soul is immortal and is transmigrated in to another human body after death. In his poems, we also find the dominance of death everywhere. Like Kabir, he also considers God as his master, *Guru* and lover.

Kabir worships the formless God (*Nirakar Ishwar* in Vedanta philosophy). His God, having no mouth, speaks a lot; having no feet, walks countless miles; having no limbs, handles the whole universe. He holds that human soul is immortal and therefore it only transmigrates from one mortal body to another according to a pre-planned providence of the Almighty.

Tagore, too, was against the cult of idol worship in its traditional form. He protested the dead customs of Hindus and Muslims. He was a realist and supporter of global brotherhood. He also endorsed the formlessness of God and approved the theory of transmigration and eternity of soul. He, too, compares his soul with a newly married bride that pines for the reunion with God. Tagore does not find his God in a temple or in a mosque or in a church but in the fields where peasants toil hard and sweat out their dreams. He finds his God among the lowliest, poorest and lost. His God does not glorify the concept of deliverance as He (God) has bounded Himself in various relations with each life-bearing creature. In this context, the following lyric from *Gitanjali* can be quoted:

*“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!  
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut  
release unrestraint  
Open thy eyes and see thy God is not before thee!  
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground  
And where the path maker is breaking stones  
He is with them in sun and shower, and His garment is covered with dust  
Put off thy holy mantle and even like Him come down on the dusty soil!  
Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found.....  
Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!  
What harm is there if thy cloth become tattered and stained  
Meet Him and stand by Him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.”*

On the other hand Kabir says:

*“Moko kahan dhoondhe re bande main to terepaas” (where dost thou look for me, I am beside thee, neither in the temple nor in the mosque, but at the same moment when you pine for me).*



Again Kabir says:

*“Pothi parhparh jag mua pandit bhaya nakoi, dhai akhar premke padhe so pandit hoi” ( After reading the great scriptures many a time one cannot be a scholar, but if one knows the fundamentals of love, he soon becomes aware of all).*

Like Kabir, Tagore also tried to communicate with the Infinite through mystic ways, sometimes in the form of lover, servant, disciple, friend and traveler.

Thus Kabir influenced Tagore externally as well as internally through his ideologies and provoking thoughts along with his treatment with this phenomenal world. Kabir's God plays many roles in his life. He has no finite form or address, no attributes or qualities from which He can be distinguished. But, He can assume any form and life. There is no particle of dust where He is not reflected.

God plays the roles of his (Kabir's) friend, master, beloved and deity of life. According to him God is inseparable from man. Between God and man there is a very thin and invisible but strong curtain of material world. God is the focal point of Kabir's religious poetry and he addresses Him by various names. He is all powerful and could only be worshipped through love and devotion. Hence Kabir supports monotheism and said that one should not search for God but realize Him within one's own heart. Discovery of God is useless but realization of Him is necessary for mankind. There is a powerful echo of the Vedic philosophy in his poems. He advocates for Non-Dualism. Tagore is closely akin to Kabir in as much as he feels the fragrance of spiritual experience coming from within and not from without.

For Tagore, his God is his Eternal father, mother, master, comrade, lover and the king of kings. This *Jivan Devata* or lord of life is intensely personal and transcends the poet's self. The doctrine of *Jivan Devata* finds its expression in his poems: *Gitanjali*, *Fruit Gathering*, *Lover's Gift* and others. *Jivan Devata* of Tagore is the guide of poet's life who is joyfully leading him through all the obstacles and barriers of *Maya* towards the fulfillment of his innermost meaning.

This guide of poet's life leads him towards union with the infinite and also makes him comprehend the complex structure of the universe and unites all things and creatures through a perfect relationship of love. This Supreme Being, who is the source of life, seeks his best expression in an individual's experiences uniting them into an ever-widening personality which is foundation of both art and religion.

Some of Tagore's poems are wreaths of poetic hymns offered to his Jivan Devata. He does not believe in the anthropomorphic conception of God. Tagore's God has several facets of divinity. He is the giver of innumerable gifts to mankind and resides in the hearts of His devotees. He may be realized through our actions. He is mystically ultimate and can be felt by keen intuition. He is bountiful and has been associated with love and affection. The poet is visibly aware of God. He says that at the mere touch of God's grace the entire negative forces of life convert into a sweet harmony. This world is a reflection of His great beauty. There is a melodious cadence in the world tuned by the great musician and we must attune ourselves to this matchless musical carnival. Tagore states that God is reflected in our life through His marvelous creation. In poet's opinion we ought not to aspire more for material gain than His grace. His God is personal as well as impersonal. He has no certain form but manifests Himself through countless forms.

Both of the poets hold that there is a stout harmony in the universe which is controlled by one infinite power. The smallest unit of our action is powered by Him and He makes an equilibrium among all living and non-living things. Through their poetry, Kabir and Tagore advocate for communal harmony to lead a *Saha j (peaceful) life*.

According to them the cosmic spirit is one, though it may be called by many names and worshipped through different methods. The ultimate truth is one though it is projected in diverse expressions. We can grasp this by an illustration given below:

*"When rain pours down from the sky, its pure water falls on the earth, mountains, rivers and the sea. But the pure rain water acquires the color and taste of the region or spot where it falls. Likewise, Prophets and Messiahs coming down in different parts of the world at different times imparted their messages in terms appropriate to the time, place and the conditions of the people concerned. For this reason religions cannot be considered different from one another. Though all religions teach only what is good for the humanity, they should be practiced with this awareness. In their works we find that ultimate truth is one, but it is beyond speech and mind. It transcends the category of time and space. Innumerable seekers have pursued different paths to recognize this truth. Though there is notable difference among the aspirants of truth, this does not affect the nature of universe; rather these differences are the various stages of understanding the cosmic process. All paths are interconnected and mutually indebted to one another for the principles and teachings they share equally".*

Kabir compares our individual soul to a newly married bride who does not know much about her groom. Although their relationship is too long and familiar to one another, yet she forgets everything. The groom is no one but the eternal soul of the universe who is the maker of everything and spreads life everywhere. Apart from this soul, human soul has no identity. We

may find this relationship at every point in his poetry. Kabir's soul laments on the separation of his beloved (the Supreme Being) because of his ignorance. But this separation is his illusion as it is a pre-estimated thought. The reality is that an invisible but very powerful curtain prevents us from His realization and the curtain is *Maya*. The poet is always eager to meet Him.

On this point, Tagore and Kabir are unanimous. He is enthusiastically curious to have a proper communication with the Infinite Force. He pines for merely a touch of His feet and serves Him through his poetic talent as Milton did despite his blindness. Often his poems are mystically sensuous in a different way; when he says

*"I have not seen his face, nor I listened to his voice; I have heard His gentle footsteps from the road before my house"* (Gitanajli.13).

Tagore feels that his beloved is very near to him but he cannot touch him as He is beyond the perception of the senses. Tagore says that human body is the temple of the soul and human soul is the temple of God. Birth and Death are nothing but unavoidable moments of life. Hence he says

*"The evening star will come out when my voyage is done and the plaintive notes of the twilight melodies are struck up from the king's gate way ..."* (Gitanjali).

This realization is not only the source of his poetry but also the guide of devotees along the labyrinthine ways of the world to the very threshold of reality. Dominance of mortality is noticeable in the poems of Kabir and Tagore. Death dominates everywhere in their poetry.

In one of his poems that Kabir wrote in his death bed he says

*"Everything moves by the ceaseless force of change: this is the law of time. Death appears changeless and cannot therefore be true: this I know for sure"*.

Kabir warns the devotees to be aware of death as this unavoidable hour does not inform before it comes. Death is certain and no one can escape it. All must die in this ephemeral world. He says that we can neither know nor able to know what will happen after death as it is one of the mysteries of the world. He suggests us to realize God so long as we live. He considers Death as the edge of life. Our mortal human body is made from five basic elements; air, water, fire, sky and the earth. When a body dies all these five elements are absorbed by Nature and human soul is released from the cage of *Maya*. Our human interpretations of death can reach only at this very point.

For Tagore, death is not a fearsome object. He welcomes death with joy and treats it as the last guest who joins the grand carnival of life hosted by the infinite power. It is like a messenger of God who has some messages for him from the Almighty. Tagore says that this life is like a long journey and death is like a stoppage where one stays for sometimes and again starts with a new and fresh life. Here he endorses the theory of transmigration of human soul. The poet sometimes fuses joy into the elegiac environment of death. He addresses it as the last fulfillment of life and feels the sweet presence of death in the air. Death is a lucky chance to meet his loved one. According to Tagore life and death go together.

He says *"It is time that I go to fill my pitcher... He says again "I know that the day will come when my sight of the earth shall be lost and life will take its leave in silence, drawing the last curtain over my eyes ..."* (Gitanjali).

Thus we see the similar treatment of death in their poetry.

Basically Kabir and Tagore are mystical poets. Mysticism is a belief that the universe is a part of an all encompassing, immanent God in a mystic way. Pantheism has also the same stand point. But their poetry endorses mystical pantheism as it also approves the notion of *Prakriti and Purus* is covered with an invisible curtain which is not easy to be raised easily. Both of them are highly inspired by Vedantic view of life. Mystical Pantheism, in their poetry is expressed through various symbols and each symbol is pregnant with an absolute idea. It is projected through a communication between the individual soul and the eternal soul.

Both of them call Him by various names which ultimately belong to one reality. Numerous forms in the world are manifestation of the A Great Power who Himself is formless.

In *Sadhana* Tagore affirms

*"Man's highest revelation is God's own revelation in him".* In the same page he writes *"The manifestation of his soul is the manifestation of God in his soul".*

The all comprehensive one, according to Tagore, is the ultimate reality which he has variously described as Supreme one, Supreme reality, Supreme soul, Supreme person, or Eternal spirit or Sachhidanand. The ultimate end of man, according to Tagore, is to find the one, which is in him, which is in his truth and which is his soul. It is the key with which he opens the gates of the spiritual life, the heavenly kingdom. In *Sadhana* he quotes the Upanishadic saying

*"This deity who is manifestation himself in the activities of the universe always dwells in the heart of man as the supreme soul".*



## Conclusion:

*“It is neither fair to judge Kabir’s works according to purely literary parameters nor it is proper to look at his assertions from the view points of those tenets which are contained in various volumes of philosophers and spiritual men. Kabir’s works are not among those colorful flowers that are well arranged in a particular order and whose beauty depends mostly on expertise of skilled gardeners. It is like a flower bloomed automatically in its place according to the law of Nature.”(Acharya Parashuram Chaturvedi).*

The above statement suggests that it is unjust to look for art everywhere in the poetic canvas of Kabir. He did not use artistic tools in describing the themes he undertook; rather he was not acquainted with much artistry of words as he himself asserted that he had never touched paper or ink or had gone for any formal education. He spoke what he realized. His utterance was inspired by the hardships of life. Whatever he felt he shared without any artifice of linguistic ornamentation.

Though Tagore was not much influenced by Kabir regarding his (Kabir’s) artistic qualities, it cannot be totally ignored. Kabir’s simplicity, humanity, universality and selection of those issues that were related to the lives of common folks, were tenets of his artistic excellence. All of Kabir’s thematic concerns fascinated Tagore.

As his poetry was down to earth so whatever Kabir said was bitter truth in a practical sense. He used common dialectical vocabulary in his poems that touched the hearts of the laymen. Tagore also assimilated this and his words are also simple and clear in his poetic works.

We may clearly see an assimilation of various cultures, practices, traditions and of the diction that was relevant to a particular theme or issue. Thus we can say that describing common life and its aspects, Kabir’s simplicity, universal themes, candidness and use of simple diction inspired Tagore in many ways. It is neither easy nor fair to estimate the repercussions and outcomes of a work, which is already under the process of germination, before its virtual appearance among the readers or audience. When an author or writer plans to produce some literary piece, he does not think much over the responses or impacts of it. His works are judged and evaluated after his ideas get a concrete form and come in the contact of readers and other scholars.

But there are some objectives, which an author keeps in his mind, to achieve when he plans to write something useful. In the same way the present work is an attempt to scrutinize closely the creative and expository writings of Tagore and also the various studies made on him with a view to establishing the influence of Kabir’s philosophy which shaped his spiritual thinking and art. Tagore’s poetry is a synthesis of the oriental and the occidental philosophy. He knew the east as well as he knew the west. Numerous Indian and foreign



influences worked actively in his writings and contributed to the making of his art and ideas. As said by T.S.Eliot in his *Tradition and Individual Talent*, **the greatest works of the masters are often those where they are most traditional**. This work also affirms Eliot's saying.

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